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This Year's Juniors: ***Class of 2004 Will Have Time to Get Needed Credits***

BY SUSAN T. NOBLE
2002 Commentary Columnist

The 2002-03 school year has begun, and all eyes are on the 86,000 or so students who will comprise the class of 2004. These students, who are juniors this year, are the first who have to earn "verified credits," in addition to passing the required number of courses, to graduate from high school.

A verified credit is awarded when a high school student receives a passing grade on a course and passes the corresponding Standards of Learning test, or other approved end-of-course assessment. By passing the test, the student verifies that he or she can demonstrate a minimum level of knowledge of the subject matter. On most of the tests, the passing score of 400 signifies what classroom teachers would consider barely passing or "D"-level work. Six verified credits are required for a Standard Diploma, nine for an Advanced Studies Diploma.

The rising level of achievement on the high school SOL tests suggests that for the vast majority of the members of the class of 2004, Virginia's new testing requirements won't bar the way to graduation. Pass rates on the 12 end-of-course tests have increased substantially since SOL testing began in 1998. For example, the pass rate on the Algebra I test has climbed from 40 percent in 1998 to 74 percent in 2001. And the pass rates on the English reading and English writing SOL tests now stand at 82 and 84 percent, respectively. While the official statewide results from the spring 2002 tests won't be available until later this month, school systems across the commonwealth are reporting significant increases in achievement on the tests.

More Credits Than Needed

Most of this year's juniors began accumulating verified credits two years ago, when as freshmen they took end-of-course SOL tests in history, science, and mathematics. Some members of the class of 2004 began racking up verified credits in middle school by passing the Algebra I test as eighth-graders. Given the fact that students take about a dozen SOL tests during their high school careers, most members of the class of 2004 are likely to graduate with far more than the minimum number of verified credits required for a Standard Diploma.

But educators can't limit their attention to "most" students. They must concern themselves with providing opportunities for success for all students. This is what the Board of Education has done during the last few years by adjusting the new graduation requirements to accommodate students in the classes of 2004, 2005, and 2006 who may not have had the full benefit of the Standards of Learning.

These "transition students" were rising fourth-, third-, and second-graders when the standards were adopted in 1995. While most of these students are well on their way to accumulating the verified credits needed for graduation, there is no denying that some of these students are struggling. Some are students who likely would have had difficulty meeting Virginia's old graduation requirements. Others are in school divisions that delayed implementing the standards, placing their students at a disadvantage on the tests.

Because of the above factors, the board has provided a significant amount of flexibility for students during the transition years. It is important that these students understand the many options they have as they move toward graduation. It also is important for the parents of these students to understand the many ways in which transition students can earn the six verified credits needed to graduate.

Students Can Repeat Tests

First, it is important that these students understand that SOL tests are not "do or die." Students may take a test as many times as necessary to earn a verified credit needed for graduation. If a student comes within 25 points of passing, he or she is entitled to an expedited re-take. That means a re-take before the next scheduled test administration. In other words, no student will be kept from graduating just because he or she had a "bad day."

In addition, transition students, who after remediation, fail a re-take of a history or science test, but achieve a score of 375 or better, may be awarded a verified credit by their local school board, following a review of their class work and/or a demonstration of their mastery of the content of the course. Verified credits awarded in this manner are awarded at the discretion of local school boards and apply only toward a Standard Diploma.

Transition students also must understand that the only subject areas in which they are required to pass tests for graduation are English reading and writing. The two verified credits earned by passing these SOL tests (or substitute English reading and writing tests approved by the board) may be combined with *any other four verified credits* to achieve the total of six required for a Standard Diploma. This "two-plus-four" plan allows transition students to lean heavily on their strongest subjects. So, for example, a transition student who is strong in mathematics and science but wobbly in history can earn the four additional

verified credits he needs by passing any four of the following six tests: Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II, Earth Science, Biology, and Chemistry. (Of course this student also would pick up verified credits by answering correctly slightly more than half of the questions on the World History I, World History II, Geography, and United States History end-of-course tests.)

The Two Plus Four Plan

The two-plus-four plan also allows transition students to earn verified credits by passing career and technical examinations. Dozens of these examinations have been approved by the Board of Education for the awarding of verified credit, including certifications in hospitality, heating and air conditioning, automotive, computer technology, and cosmetology. It is incumbent upon teachers and guidance counselors to make sure that students who are enrolled in career and technical courses that offer these certifications take advantage of these opportunities to earn verified credits.

Parents can help by keeping track of their children's progress and making sure that they take advantage of opportunities for re-testing and for earning verified credits through certifications offered in association with career and technical courses. Annual student reports should be kept in a file for easy reference. By keeping a running tally, parents will know just where their children stand and what they need to accomplish to graduate with their class. By being informed, parents will be better able to plan for their child's success by communicating with teachers and guidance counselors.

Virginia is already seeing how meaningful graduation requirements increase student achievement. Last year's seniors, the first graduating class required to tackle algebra in order to earn a diploma, posted an impressive 5-point increase in mathematics achievement on the SAT. Armed with the confidence that comes from succeeding in challenging courses, more and more students – especially minorities – are setting their sights on college and enrolling in advanced courses.

So, here's to the students of the class of 2004. The eyes of Virginia are upon you. Some will be looking for you to stumble during the next two years in hopes that your failure will validate their opposition to standards and accountability. But most Virginians look for your success. They sense the confidence of your step in your achievements so far, and expect that when you cross the stage in the spring of 2004, you will set a new standard for excellence and academic achievement.